

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, MARCH 24, 2024
MESSAGE: BETWEEN TRIUMPH AND REALITY
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN

SCRIPTURES: Mark 11:1-11

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples **2** and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. **3** If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” **4** They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, **5** some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” **6** They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. **7** Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. **8** Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. **9** Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

SERMON: BETWEEN TRIUMPH AND REALITY

Have you ever encountered a triumph that didn't really feel like a triumph after reality sets in?

I know it sounds weird, but really we experience these moments all the time. Maybe you've gotten a new job and you were so elated that you were hired, only to find that when you showed up your first day at the office that they actually expected you to, you know, work. Or maybe you got married, had a big party and a honeymoon, and then got home and realized that you were... married, and suddenly you have to negotiate all your decision making from cleaning habits to taxes with another person. Or maybe you spent years looking for a pastor for your church, were elated to finally find one, and then realized that that pastor was expecting you to do a bunch of stuff.

Triumph is often accompanied by a period of uncertainty when the reality of your triumph sets in. I imagine Jesus felt the same way entering Jerusalem. He knew that He was arriving at the pinnacle of His ministry and the salvation of humankind, but also understood that it was going to be overwhelming and hard. After his triumphant arrival into Jerusalem, he responded by promptly retreating into the countryside to be alone with his closest friends.

This delicate space between Triumph and Reality is crucial, and unfortunately, often neglected. We spend our time planning weddings, job searching, and preparing for the Big Things in our lives. In the midst of all that preparation, we rarely take time to think about the thin space between triumph and reality and what that will be like. On your wedding night, you're probably more worried about the coordination of catering than you are about who is going to be responsible for emptying the dish rack next week. When you start a new job, you're probably thinking of all the skills you're building onto your resume, rather than your boss bickering about a redundancy on a spreadsheet you have to edit next month.

The space between Triumph and Reality needs to be more central to our lives and our faith. In our churches, it's considered a huge win when we baptize new believers and guide them toward Jesus. That moment is Spirit filled and wonderful. There's few things more magical than watching someone become cleaned and renewed in Him. Then later during that "in between" time, questions about the Bible, such as "what does Paul mean when he says women shouldn't talk in church?" or "Isn't it cruel that God essentially played a very serious joke on Abraham when he almost sacrificed Isaac?" pop up. Or the reality of church relationships being fraught with gossip, division, and bickering begins to surface. That transformational baptism suddenly fades once we've wandered into that in-between space of the big moments and the reality of life in a faith community comes up. Many young people end up leaving the church for this exact reason: they have important transformations in Christ, only to find that the daily life of the church is not quite what they expected.

Homeless services struggles with this same problem of the neglected transitional space between Triumph and Reality. There's even a name for it: it's called "housing retention". It's a big deal when a person secures housing after months or years living in the shelters or on the streets. The case managers set up their new home, bring them a gift basket, take pictures and celebrate the win of transitioning into housing. Then after the door is closed and the housing workers have gone home, the four walls of their quiet new apartment feel oppressive. All the noise, drama, and consistent functioning of the shelter falls away into the openness of having your own place that you have to take care of by yourself

alone. Those first three months after a person transitions into housing are considered crucial because it's the period in which people are most likely to crash back into homelessness – all because the reality of housing didn't match the triumphant experience of getting there in the first place. Every social services agency I've worked for bills government services twice for this reason: once when the person initially gets housed, and then again after 3 months if the person has still successfully maintained that housing. According to US Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 84-91% of the time, we don't get to collect the second billing for housing retention. You heard that right – only 9-16% of the people successfully housed after experiencing homelessness stay housed for at least 3 months after the initial placement.

Jesus understood the gravity of this delicate in-between space. In the verses following Jesus' triumphant ride into Jerusalem and his subsequent retreat into Bethany, He appears to sort of have a panic attack. In the following verses of Mark 11, Jesus curses a fig tree and kills it, and then goes to the Temple and drives everyone out with the whip and then starts squabbling with the religious leaders. He was very aware that the triumph of entering the gates of Jerusalem wasn't the end of the story.

It's ok to not feel ok when you're in the space between Triumph and Reality. It's ok to ask questions about the Bible and expect the church to engage with you on them. It's ok that your job, or your marriage, or your church ended up looking much different in practice than it did when you celebrated entering into it. The reality after Triumph doesn't have to be all singing angels and bliss, in fact, it very rarely is. Sometimes it looks more like riding a donkey in the street and then retreating into feelings of anxiety or frustration.

Jesus understood that the fruits of His Triumph would eventually come to pass. He knew that the New Thing would come, and the message of following and uniting under Him would eventually happen. Yet, in that moment, he just felt overwhelmed and disappointed. He responded by confiding his disappointment in his friends.

To get through these moments, we need each other. Jesus' immediate reaction to his big feelings around the space between Triumph and Reality was to go be alone with his friends and vet his frustrations with them. Similarly, that 9-16% of people who retain their housing after experiencing homelessness all have one thing in common: they have a group of friends that they can confide in about the difficulties of maintaining housing. They have consistent people in their lives they can channel their anxiety with through the in-between space.

Even if church is broken and sometimes irritating or disappointing, these people around you are the ones that you can and should ask questions of. Not just questions like “how was your weekend” or “how is your family,” but real questions like “Why can’t I hear God speaking to me?” or “How can I help my family member who refuses to change?”

The difference between this family sitting here together and any other relationship you have in your life is that this group of people has dedicated themselves to be together through that space between Triumph and Reality. The church isn’t simply a place where you celebrate life’s big moments – it’s the place where we process those moments together with integrity. It’s the place where we work out how we’re going to get from the moment where people are waving palm leaves and cheering for us into the place where we’re doing the gritty, hard work of living into God’s calling for each of us together.

As I conclude this message, I’d like for you to pause and think about the big questions I have about your lives and your futures. Ask yourselves – is this church the place where you’re willing and able to walk through hard questions together? Are we willing to hold each other’s hands through panicked anxiety about the future? Are we still here together after the crowds have stopped cheering and the palm leaves have dried out?

We are Jesus’ disciples, walking with the Holy Spirit in each other through those moments between Triumph and Reality. We can and should also be that caring space between Triumph and Reality for those entering new housing, or entering new faith, or entering any new reality, because it’s what Jesus calls us to do in community. May it be so.

Amen.